

NATIONAL AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH, EXTENSION, EDUCATION, AND ECONOMICS ADVISORY BOARD

Executive Director
Room 3918 South Building
REE Advisory Board Office
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Washington, DC 20250-2255

Mailing Address:
STOP 2255
1400 INDEPENDENCE AVE SW
Washington, DC 20250-2255
Telephone: 202-720-3684
FAX: 202-720-6199

Improving Public Understanding and Appreciation of Agriculture

White Paper of the National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics Advisory Board

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has been considering the problem of improving public awareness of the success of the U.S. agricultural system. A recent report, *Communication Implementation Committee Recommendations Report* (October 1996), has outlined some very important steps that the Department should consider. The National Agricultural Research, Extension, Education, and Economics Advisory Board (NAREEE) supports the recommendations raised in this report.

Additionally, NAREEE believes it is imperative for the Department to develop consistent communication goals and institute mechanisms to foster creative thinking about effectively meeting such goals. NAREEE believes that effective communications can only be achieved by integration of the responsibility into line programs. Further, NAREEE is concerned that the separation of the communications and press relations functions have become so blurred that timely and effective communication is often hampered by unnecessary institutional controls.

The NAREEE recommends that all of the Department's communication efforts be focused upon achieving certain defined goals. The NAREEE suggests the following communication goals for the REE mission area:

- 1) Improve science literacy in consumers and policy makers;
- 2) Restoration of public confidence and credibility in the Department's natural resource and environmental programs, as well as agriculture's ability to produce food and fiber that is high-quality, safe, abundant, and affordable;

Honorable Dan Glickman

COMMUNICATIONS WHITE PAPER

- 3) Regain and/or establish public understanding of and commitment for agricultural research and education;
- 4) Provide targeted information on the important public return on investments made in agricultural research and education;
- 5) Support important review and accountability programs ensuring the long-term relevance of agricultural research and education programs; and
- 6) Satisfy the public that agricultural research and education programs efficiently and effectively address important matters of national, state, and local concern.

In achieving these important goals, the Department must rededicate itself to communication in cogent and understandable ways which the public can understand. Redoubled and innovative efforts must be undertaken to translate science into a public language of relevance to consuming Americans.

NAREEE recommends that the Secretary identify two or three (blockbuster) programs regarding more effective public communications in which to break the existing inertia and point to innovative ways the Secretary and the Department can more effectively communicate with the American public. To this end, NAREEE has identified three such possible suggestions:

I) Commitment of Departmental Leadership & Line Employees to Quality and Effective Communication;

II) Major Public Awareness Campaign; and

III) Taking Full Advantage of Modern Information Technology.

NAREEE recommends that the Secretary develop programs that emphasize these three points as expanded on below:

I. Commitment to Quality and Effective Communication

Challenge: The U.S. Department of Agriculture is in need of a meaningful *Quality Communications Program* instituted by the Secretary, implemented by heads of the Research, Education, and Economics mission area, and established for the training of all employees. (Although the REE mission area is referenced here in context, the ‘Commitment to Quality and Effective Communication’ should apply to all employees within USDA.) It must be the objective of such training to *institutionalize* effective public education and communication into the responsibilities of line employees.

All quality programs are based on the fundamental premise that serious management involvement is mandatory for success. Thus, *active management* participation is an essential ingredient to get employees to buy in to the need for such programs.

Result: USDA will recognize and communicate with its numerous customers - internally, externally, and the American public. There is considerable work to do to make sure employees know who their customers are, know what they want, and know what they need. Research, Education, and Extension personnel will recognize the value of and routinely integrate effective public education and communication into line responsibilities.

Approach: Must first get all USDA employees excited (empowered) about agriculture, quality, and agriculture's impact on American citizens in order to get customers excited. The approach must be new, not a repackaging of old messages. Messages must resonate with contemporary customer needs and interests.

Example: Three-day mandatory Quality Program Session for all USDA employees. This session should focus on mechanisms by which employees can effectively:
1) interact with stakeholders to ensure relevance of program work; and
2) creatively communicate the value of the work they do.

A Quality Program that empowers all USDA employees will, by definition, institutionalize employee communication to the public on the value and attractiveness of agricultural research.

II. Major Campaign to Enhance Public Awareness of Successes of American Agriculture and the Fascinating Challenges of the Future

Challenges: (1) Effectively convey the importance and relevance of the American food and fiber system to the health and welfare of Americans. Must be done from the perspectives of the U.S. citizens -- be captivating for all ages.

(2) Build the scientific and production workforce and support base for agriculture in the future. Invoke questions - Who develops all those interesting things? How do I get involved?

Result: This campaign should improve upon as well as offer a step beyond the USDA traditional outreach, training, and education system in place. Examples given below may be costly and will require resource sharing and strengthened partnerships with public and private sectors - but will also effectively reach out to the broader public and inspire new questions of agricultural scientists and other workers.

With appealing and informative attention grabbers, the highly needed public understanding and appreciation of agriculture practices and achievements would be attainable in areas such as:

- economic impacts of our food, agriculture, and forestry system;
- international trade;
- nutritional value of food;
- new biodegradable products from agricultural research for health and utility;
- research and education on the safety of food (farm to table);
- impacts of technology (e.g., biotechnology, irradiation, information technology); and
- responsible agricultural practices relative to environmental research on reducing pest damage, infectious diseases, and detrimental effects of climate and weather on food and agriculture.

Examples: 1) Major public TV event that focuses on USDA - [Ken Burns-type multi-part Documentary Series]

Goal: engaging, thought-provoking, historical, futuristic, illustrative of sound science and high priority issues in clear, understandable language. Documentaries on Justin Morrill, Smith & Lever, etc.

Examples
(Continued):

- 2) Video games, Cartoon television shows or multi-activity, Educational shows for children [similar to Oregon and Amazon Trail videos, and Barney, Little Bear, Magic School Bus, Mr. Rogers Neighborhood-type shows]

Goal: an engaging, entertaining, and learning show for pre-school and elementary children, using imaginative names (Calvin Cornflower, Freddie Filet, etc.) - [Bill Cosby, Bill Murray-type productions].

- 3) Engaging and/or Interactive Exhibits at Expositions, Museums, and Theme or Recreation Parks [like Epcot Center]

Goal: visibility to large groups of people, on trendy high focus issues or events, drawing public attention, interest, and excitement.

- 4) Collaboration with the Smithsonian Institute to develop an interactive display which capitalizes upon the USDA presence on Capitol Mall

Goal: to capture visitors to the Capital City with imaginative presentations regarding the importance of the Nation's food and fiber system.

- 5) Cooperative education programs with those who deliver, market or otherwise present the products of the American food and fiber system to consumers

Goal: to leverage the resources of USDA with those of groups like the Nation's grocers, restaurants, and clothing manufacturers and retailers. [Example: Ag In The Classroom]

- 6) Assembling top marketing and media experts for their input on effective mechanisms that reach out to and captivate the broader public interest over the short- and long-term

Goal: broaden USDA's insight on successful and creative marketing and communication techniques.

Examples (Continued): 7) Sponsor a high level Secretary's Summit on Public Understanding and Appreciation of Agricultural Science and Technology

Goals: engage the White House, members of Congress, and high level officials from Federal agencies, State and local governments, the Land-Grant system, news media, and broad agriculture community in a highly visible Summit to emphasize the importance of agricultural science and technology to every American; highlight the achievements of food, forestry, and agriculture research and the many benefits of research to society; invite the President or Vice President to present the keynote address, reaffirming the Administration's ongoing commitment to agriculture research and education; involve the National Academy of Sciences Review Committee.

III. Information Superhighway

Challenge: USDA must take full advantage of the information superhighway by developing well-presented, well-organized and timely Web Pages and *Chat Rooms*, with links to many other sites. In addition, the popularity of *CD-ROMs* (for digital access of text and audio) provides consumers with numerous choices for reference tools, entertainment, and learning.

Result: The information superhighway will enable anyone with a question and a computer having online access to quickly reach reliable and attractive USDA information that represents *sound science and factual information*, and to network with experts in a particular field or subject area. *CD-ROMs* provide the added depth of coverage and audio and visual attractiveness, which are appealing to youth and adults alike as an enjoyable learning activity.

Example in Point:

When the news of “Dolly” hit the press, within 48 hours, USDA should have had on the Web site a summary of current USDA work on genetic engineering, the reason for it, how it will positively improve the average American in the 21st century, and how USDA is acting responsibly in questions such as cloning, etc.

- This is an example of where NAREEE feels USDA should be in the process, function, and response modes on any highly visible issue. This approach demonstrates responsiveness and expediency of action by the government for crises or “hot” issues. (Once information is accessible on a Web site, by definition, it becomes public news.)
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BACKGROUND

Secretary's Charge to NAREEE: In December 1996, Secretary Glickman met with the Advisory Board Chair and Vice Chair and charged the Board with the challenging task to recommend a *mechanism by which USDA could improve public understanding and appreciation of food and agriculture as well as could clearly communicate to the public the many benefits of agricultural research on quality of life*. In response to this charge, the Advisory Board established a Working Group on Performance Assessment and Public Education at its second meeting held in March 1997. The draft White Paper of the Working Group was adopted by NAREEE at its meeting on 11/5/97.

The public in general does not understand what agriculture is, what agriculture does, how USDA operates as an Executive Branch Department, the roles of key agencies, divisions and units, the importance of food, forestry and agricultural research, as well as the potential challenges for our agriculture system (threats and scientific advances) for Americans in the 21st century. The significance of changing this view of agriculture, *whether it be a perceptual or a realistic one*, is critical to U.S. agriculture's structure, function, and success in the coming years.

The Advisory Board broadly defines *stakeholder* as "any individual or group of individuals who have a vested interest in, or are affected by, food and agricultural research, extension, education, and economics" when addressing its wide range of mandated activities. Although this definition applies well to this overall charge, NAREEE believes emphasis of the outcome of this charge must be on the average American - the non-agricultural community representing the everyday consumer - youth, elderly, families, community, who face common concerns as a U.S. citizen, such as economic prosperity, food safety and quality, environmental pollution, and human health.

NAREEE also believes that all the key groups must be involved from the highest USDA levels to the grass roots, including: 1) USDA Personnel; 2) USDA Partners; 3) Media; 4) Producers and Ranchers; 5) Processors and Handlers; 6) Businesses; 7) Environmentalists; 8) Consumers; and 9) General Public.

The Advisory Board endorses the October 1996 ***Communication Implementation Committee Recommendations Report*** as the general framework for USDA action. The *Communications Report* was published by an REE interagency committee to further one of several recommendations generated from findings of an REE Quality Research Initiative Task Force study that reads:

"III. Effective communication of purpose, objectives, and results is important to establishing research relevance.

1. REE leadership should: promote the progress and excellence occurring in agricultural research and invite experts from both the agricultural and nonagricultural communities to share in panel discussions on agricultural research issues.

2. *The current information services should do a more effective job of getting the message out to the broader, nontraditional agricultural community and the general public about what REE is doing and accomplishing.*
3. *Strong ties need to be established -- and where already established, reinforced (sic) -- with both users of REE data products and other government data producers to facilitate the generation of the most useful and cost-effective data products possible.*
4. *Quality declarations for all REE data series should be produced. Such declarations would provide interested users with important information for decision making as well as assurances about the quality of REE data products they employ.”*

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